

# Critical Media Studies 2.0: an interactive upgrade

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## Abstract

*When it comes to the revolutionary promise of participatory media, the challenge faced by the proponents and practitioners of a Critical Media Studies 2.0 is not to assert (in all too familiar rhetoric) that, 'everything has changed,' but rather to explain why, even in the face of dramatic technological transformation, power relations remain largely unaltered. This essay explores some of the ways in which the social context has shifted to absorb and deflect the critical potential of interactive media and traces the outlines of a critical project for Media Studies in the digital era. In particular, it argues that the automatic equation of interactivity with political critique and democratic empowerment represents an outdated way of thinking about the social role of information and communication technologies. Interactivity isn't automatically political – it needs to be made political if it is to live up to its promised potential. Consequently, critical Media Studies needs to develop new practices of sense making, an updated theory of exploitation, and a political economy for the digital era.*

## Keywords

interactivity  
new media  
Media Studies  
critical theory  
surveillance  
advertising  
mass customization

As a starting point, the essay poses the following question: what are we to make of the fact that the advent of 'bottom-up' media production amidst celebratory claims about the democratizing power of interactivity have coincided, arguably, with increasing economic and political *inequality*. It is a question admittedly posed from a situated perspective: in the United States, Web 2.0 came of age in the era of George W. Bush, a regime tellingly installed not by the voters, but by judicial fiat. It was a regime of increased government opacity, the seizure of executive power, and tight-knit crony capitalism. The concentration of ownership of resources and the increasing disparity between the wealthy few and the rest of the population in the United States reached the point that economist Paul Krugman (2002) described as a return to the 'Gilded Age' of the turn of the last century. Thus, when it comes to the revolutionary promise of participatory media, the challenge faced by the proponents and practitioners of a *Critical Media Studies 2.0* is not to assert (in all too familiar rhetoric) that, 'everything has changed,' but rather to explain why, even in the face of dramatic technological transformation, social relations remain largely unaltered.

To put it bluntly, critical Media Studies is not interested in media for their own sake, but for society's sake. To note the fascinating changes in media technology and practices without situating them within the

broader context of a society working to incorporate them into existing social relations is to lose sight of the ball. If the advent of Media Studies 2.0 is to mean anything beyond the dismissal of the need for critical theory and the melding of industry with the academy – of market research with critique – it must reflect more carefully on the legacy of Media Studies 1.0. Why were scholars so critical of top-down, one-way, centralized media industries – why so focused on issues of critical media literacy and ideology critique? The concern was not directed solely toward a particular set of media structures (top-down, one-way, etc.) so much as it was with the way in which these structures helped reproduce power and social relations.

Claims that interactivity is inherently political or empowering, or that changes in social relations necessarily follow from the fact that audiences have become more active participants, are not cutting edge, avant-garde claims; instead they are relics of an outdated binary: old-school ways of thinking tricked up to look hip, savvy, and contemporary. We should pause for a moment of critical reflection when Rupert Murdoch, a baron of the ‘old media’ insists that ‘it’s the people who are taking control’ as he buys the latest, trendy, social networking website (Spencer Reiss 2006).

The brave new world of digital media require us to think beyond such outdated oppositions to imagine the possibility that interactive participation may be worse than politically inert. To make an automatic association between interactive participation and democratic empowerment is intellectually complacent in the worst sense: by clinging to an outmoded set of associations it bypasses the conceptual work that might help imagine ways in which media practices could live up to the promise of democratic empowerment. A critical Media Studies 2.0, then, must focus on change, but not in the limited sense of elaborating upon the dramatic transformations in media technologies and their uses. Like other forms of critical theory, where it encounters celebratory claims of rupture and transformation, it seeks to unearth historical continuities – and in so doing to consider precisely those changes that may have occurred to make such continuity possible. Herein lies the challenge: to develop critical approaches that are suited to the contemporary media environment, rather than to assume that because media have transformed, social relations have too. The following sections attempt to outline ways in which society has adjusted to incorporate digital media in ways that preserve power relations. The goal is to suggest some elements of a critical approach to digital media and in so doing to upgrade critical theory in ways that make sense of the fact that the media revolution has not facilitated a social one, while remaining committed to the possibility that it might.

### **Latour’s lament**

One of the oft-repeated mantras of a pre-critical version of Media Studies 2.0 is the assertion that interactivity, one of the important capabilities of digital, interactive media, is by definition empowering. As Coleman (2003) puts it, ‘Interactivity is political: it shifts control towards the receivers of messages and makes all representations of reality vulnerable to public challenge and disbelief’ (2003: 35). An interesting equation is at work in

this formulation: that fostering ‘disbelief’ or ‘challenge’ amounts to a shift in control. It is an equation that may not take into account the way in which strategies of savvy debunkery might reinforce, rather than threaten, relations of power and control. Nevertheless, variants of this claim replicate themselves across a range of discourses, from the popular to the academic, and must be understood as forming a keystone of media ideology 2.0. The media themselves have been getting in on the act, as evidenced by *Time* magazine’s person of the year celebrating ‘you’ – that is, all of us – as people of the year, thanks to the empowering force of interactive media: ‘It’s about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes’ (Grossman 2006).

Such sentiments follow the path paved by the celebratory claims of media theorists that, ‘Far from the telescreen dystopias, new media technology hails a rebirth of democratic life’ (Bryan 1998: 5). New media guru Howard Rheingold is slightly more circumspect, noting that whether the Internet comes to serve as an online Agora or a virtual panopticon will depend on who controls it and for what purposes. Still his outlook remains, on the whole, more optimistic than pessimistic when he asserts that, ‘The political significance of computer mediated communication lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy’s monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy’ (Rheingold 1993: 14).

The constellation of themes in these claims take for granted a particular modality of power: one in which control is exerted in a top-down way that must be protected from feedback – from the ability to question or respond. It is a monolithic, industrial-era model of power, which is why Celia Pearce, in her book on interactivity, insists that its promise, ‘is one of intellectual, creative and social empowerment. It is anti-industrial’ (Pearce 1997: 183). The formulation recalls the techniques that critics deployed against ideology in the industrial era: attempts to denaturalize and deconstruct, to reveal the forms of power that permeated claims to truth and knowledge: to talk back to power. It is in this context that the promise of interactivity emerges not just as a political one, but as potentially subversive and empowering: a tool of demystification perhaps unwittingly crafted by a modern-day Prometheus of the information revolution and duly handed over to the populace at large. Interactivity is political, according to this account, because the hermeneutics of suspicion serve as a tool for empowerment when strategies for control operate in the mode of naturalized certainty and truth.

What if, however, the modality of control can itself shift, in ways that incorporate the very forms of critique that once sought to challenge it by undermining and deconstructing it? Such is the possibility raised by Bruno Latour (2004) in his lament on the fate of critique, ‘Threats might have changed so much that we might still be directing all our arsenal east or west while the enemy has now moved to a very different place’ (Latour 2004: 230). This new ‘place’, Latour suggests, is one in which the forms of challenge, suspicion, and deconstruction that once posed a threat now help to fuel strategies of control. What if, in other words, that which was once challenged by the deconstructive arsenal now feeds upon it? As an

example, Latour cites an account of the strategy adopted by U.S. Republicans to fend off environmental regulation:

Most scientists believe that [global] warming is caused largely by manmade pollutants that require strict regulation. Mr. Luntz [a Republican strategist] seems to acknowledge as much when he says that 'the scientific debate is closing against us.' His advice, however, is to emphasize that the evidence is not complete. 'Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled,' he writes, 'their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the *lack of scientific certainty* a primary issue.'

(Latour 2004: 226; emphasis in the original)

The goal is to maintain the status quo not by shutting down critique, but embracing it.

This strategy of what might be called the postmodern right is not limited to scientific controversies, like global warming, but comes into play whenever dominant narratives are politically inconvenient. The Bush administration and its various supporters have proven particularly adept at what Latour terms, 'instant revisionism ... adding even more smoke to the smoke' (Latour 2004: 228). Consider, for example, the 2004 campaign, in which the so-called 'Swift Vote Veterans for Truth' were enlisted to sow confusion in the midst of what had been a straightforward narrative about the two candidates' service records in the Vietnam era: one 'child of privilege' received a coveted domestic posting, which he left early; the other volunteered for combat, saw action, and was cited for valour in combat. The 'Swift Boat Veterans' campaign, which comprised a book and several TV ads, did not so much provide a credible counter-narrative as obscure the original one with a series of charges and accusations that tied the media up in knots. Combined with the ongoing campaign by the right to discredit the media for its ostensible liberal bias, the goal was to demonstrate the impossibility of getting at the truth, leaving it up to voters to, instead, choose the narrative that best fit their prejudices, preconceptions and predispositions. By multiplying the narratives – and in particular, narratives that cast uncertainty on one another, the campaign sought to highlight the absence of any 'objective' standard for arbitrating between them.

As political commentator Josh Marshall (2003) has observed, the attempt to deconstruct dominant narratives goes hand in hand with the, 'incentive to delegitimize the experts' – a process facilitated by the cacophony of punditry that passes for expert commentary in the cable news world. The signature move is the conflation of the insight that all knowledge is characterized by bias, with the assertion that such knowledge is wholly reducible to bias. As Marshall (2003) puts it, 'at the heart of the revisionist mindset is the belief that ... [i]deology isn't just the prism through which we see the world, or a pervasive tilt in the way a person understands a given set of facts. Ideology is really all there is.' Perhaps the definitive statement of this approach was provided by journalist Ron Suskind's (2004) encounter with a Bush aide who mocked journalists for living in what he disparaged as a 'reality-based community,' in which

people, 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality ... That's not the way the world really works anymore ... We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.'

The strategic goal here is not the top-down, assertion of a naturalized discourse that needs to be exempted from interrogation, but the attempt to deconstruct certainty, and 'talk back' to the experts. The automatic deconstructive gesture – the attempt to productively destabilize discourses and highlight their constructed and biased character – finds itself co-opted for regressive ends. Critique is turned back upon itself. Latour is here imagining the possibility of a shift in context that would require new critical tools and approaches: 'It does not seem to me that we have been as quick, in academia, to prepare ourselves for new threats, new dangers, new tasks, new targets. Are we not like those mechanical toys that endlessly make the same gesture when everything else has changed around them?' (Latour 2004: 225). As deconstructive debunkery becomes automatic, mechanical and taken for granted, it can no longer be unthinkingly equated with progressive politics, or a subversive challenge to power. It may have become, in certain contexts, a ruse of the very forms of power against which it once set itself.

It is not hard to discern that the strategy of disseminating uncertainty relies on shifts in the media environment – on the proliferation of information outlets, the fragmentation of audiences, the way in which interactivity renders 'representations of reality vulnerable to public challenge and disbelief' (Coleman 2003: 35). The goal is not to call for an impossible return or retreat to the days when 'the most trusted man in America' could tell viewers on a nightly basis, 'That's the way it is.' Rather it is to come to terms with the recognition that in the current conjuncture, there is no clear-cut political opposition between strategies of naturalization and techniques of reflexive deconstruction: both can serve regressive ends and be deployed as strategies for manipulation, obfuscation, and the reproduction of power relations. The challenge is to trace the relationship between critique and knowledge, to discern how an unreflective critique turns on itself, and how to extricate it from this impasse.

The smokescreen approach to political manipulation has a long and storied history, but, as Latour's analysis implies, it has come into its own in an era in which an unthinking 'savvy' scepticism aligns itself with the emerging interactive ethos. Yes, the interactive capability of the Internet makes it possible to talk back, to question, to circulate counter-narratives, and consequently to counter dominant narratives. In an era in which the reproduction of social relations relied solely on the unquestioned reproduction of such narratives, we might well describe the deployment of interactivity as politically subversive, perhaps even politically empowering. However, when the exercise of certain forms of political power relies on mobilization and co-optation of such critical strategies, the political potential of such forms of interactivity is at best ambivalent. Nor, as Latour's example suggests, is the reflexive debunking of expertise necessarily progressive in an era in which political power reproduces itself at least in part by reducing all forms of expertise to ideology – leaving those in power free to select the version that fits their agenda. This is a form of politics practiced across the mainstream political spectrum, from Hillary

Cinton's well publicized dismissal of the experts' criticism of her proposed gas tax holiday ('I'm not going to put my lot in with economists') to Bush's famous reliance on gut instinct over evidence, to Rush Limbaugh's certainty that global warming is a hoax cooked up by liberals who hate big business.

This popularization of a variant of what might be described as unreflective postmodern debunkery exhibits a certain affinity with the technologies and practices that enable it. Sherry Turkle (1997) noted, relatively early on in the Internet era, the affinity between new media practices and a ready recognition of the constructed character of representation: 'technology is bringing a set of ideas associated with postmodernism – in this case, ideas about the instability of meanings and the lack of universal and knowable truths – into everyday life' (Turkle 1997: 18). She suggests that the participatory character of the Internet, and in particular the forms of online socializing it fostered, were responsible. As users shifted from consuming mediated images to creating them, they gained a self-conscious, practice-based awareness about the constructed character of media representations. This type of awareness might be described as 'post-deferential' (see, for example, Coleman (2003)) insofar as it is associated with an unwillingness to take dominant media representations at face value. It is hard to imagine that Walter Cronkite's famous sign off could function in any other than an ironic register (along the line of Fox's 'Fair and Balanced' motto) in a post-deferential era.

Taken to its limit the post-deferential attitude results in the impasse that Slavoj Žižek (1999) has described in terms of the decline of symbolic efficiency. As he puts it, symbolic efficiency relies upon, 'the distance (between "things" and "words") which opens up the space for ... symbolic engagement' (Žižek 1996: 196). That is to say it is the paradoxical space of the symbolic that acknowledges the possibility that things might be otherwise than how they 'directly' seem. This distance, Žižek suggests, has an important role to play at the level of social and political institutions in which:

... the symbolic mask-mandate matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears this mask and/or assumes this mandate. This function involves the structure of fetishistic disavowal: 'I know very well that things are the way I see them [that this person is a corrupt weakling], but none the less I treat him with respect, since he wears the insignia of a judge, so that when he speaks it is the Law itself which speaks through him'.

(Žižek 1999: 323)

The post-deferential attitude short-circuits this logic, brushing aside the symbolic mandate in order to get directly at the 'corrupt weakling' behind the black robe. As in the case of virtual reality, it allows for no space between the code and what it defines.

It is not hard to trace connections between the forms of post-deferentialism described by Turkle and Žižek, and the way in which the constructed character of representation comes to the fore in an environment of information glut. The proliferation of content takes several forms including the recycling of content, the multiplication of alternative narratives,

and the reflexive documentation of the story behind the story, or the show about the making of the show. None of these tendencies is original or unique to the Internet or the digital era – the difference is more one of quantity than of kind – and yet the combination is unique and worth considering. Nor does the assertion of the correlation between post-deferentialism and digital media necessarily imply causality: there are many different ways to use digital networks, and the uses at issue are the result of the current social, economic, and cultural conjuncture.

To the extent that it serves as an enormous content archive, the Internet, ephemeral as it may be in some ways, allows users to step outside the flow of more perishable media like radio, TV, newspapers, and magazines. Last week's news is still available online, along with rebuttals, qualifications, alternative perspectives, and so on. It is telling that the dominant metaphors for the Internet tend to be spatial ones ('cyberspace', 'websurfing', 'hyperlinking', etc.), whereas those for other media are often more temporally oriented (the linear 'flow' of TV or radio programming, the fleeting character of yesterday's news, and so on). It is the broad sweep of this information landscape that helps make any particular point isolated from it purely partial or perspectival, arbitrarily closed off from an ever-more complex context, from myriad alternative narratives and perspectives. It is a perfect medium for an era of media reflexivity – one in which the populace is increasingly savvy about the constructed nature of representation.

Against this background, the task of critical Media Studies 2.0 is two-fold: to consider the ways in which the deployment of networked digital media contribute to and reinforce the contemporary exercise of power, and to imagine how it might be otherwise. A clearer understanding of the former process helps provide some outlines for the latter – for developing forms of critique that keep pace with the social shifts that have accompanied transformations in media technology and practice. However, the developments of new strategies for the reproduction of power relations do not necessarily mean that the old ones have died out. Thus, the goal is to highlight emergent tendencies and logics that call for updated critical strategies.

### **Interactivity as feedback**

In the interactive era, it is perhaps time to turn Foucault (1978) on his head: the obverse of the assertion that where there is power there is also always resistance should become a watchword of critical Media Studies 2.0: where there is resistance there are always new and realigned strategies for control. We might go so far as to propose an interactive repressive hypothesis: whenever we are told that interactivity is a way to express ourselves, to rebel against control, to subvert power, we need to be wary of power's ruse: the incitation to provide information about ourselves, to participate in our self-classification, to complete the cybernetic loop.

The commercial sector, for example, takes a decidedly two-faced approach to its portrayal of interactivity: one face nodding back toward the ways in which interactivity challenges top-down media models, and one smiling at the prospect of even greater forms of information management and manipulation. The result has been the twinning of narratives

about interactivity: one version for public consumption and another for the trade-literature. The former pays lip service to the emerging power of what is portrayed as the almost tyrannically demanding interactive consumer (dubbed the new 'king'), the latter portrays interactivity as an opportunity for enhanced control, hyper-targeting of advertising, and the monitoring based rationalization of the marketing process.

Thanks to the advent of interactivity, marketers envision a world in which it becomes increasingly possible to subject the public to a series of controlled experiments to determine how best to influence them. Consider the example of the video game industry, which is helping to pioneer interactive advertising by custom-targeting ads to players based on detailed monitoring of their game play combined with demographic information. The goal is not just to serve up relevant ads, but also to use the interactive, immersive character of game play as a means for thwarting critical reflection. As one recent study of in-game advertising puts it, neatly highlighting the marketing perspective, 'when participants are immersed in the narrative, they are distracted from the advertisement and therefore do not think critically about it' (Glass 2007).

The point here, intriguingly, is the exact reverse of the notion that active engagement (rather than 'passive' viewing) fosters critical engagement. Frenetic interactivity, on this account, helps to mask the forms of control that it works to reproduce: the very incitation to interact doubles as a technique for managing audiences and channelling their activities. Turned to the ends of marketing, interactivity is embraced not for the ways in which it fosters challenges to dominant messages and critical scepticism, but for the ways in which it forestalls them. As Glass (2007) puts it, "The video game should take the player's guard down when it comes to advertisements."

Whether or not interactivity truly functions in this way, and in what contexts, remains an open question – but it is suggestive that the marketing industry is thinking in this direction. For those trying to keep up with the ever-accelerating pace of the always-on, constant contact information age, the notion that hyper-interactivity might thwart or interfere with critical reflection is perhaps not a particularly outlandish one. A forward leaning, engaged posture of constant reaction and incessant interruption – that of the gamer as opposed, perhaps, to the more 'passive' viewer, is not necessarily conducive to stepping back to reflect on the big picture. What if it should turn out that we actually had more time to critically reflect on the forms of manipulation to which we were subjected in the mass media era, when we weren't subject to the constant injunction to interact, respond, click the next link, and download the newest application? What if interactive media serve, in part, as means of short-circuiting the very forms of reflection that increasingly undermined the authority of 'one-way,' 'top-down' media technologies?

These questions aren't meant to imply a nostalgia for the mass media, but to suggest that the opposition between critical interactivity and passive consumption may have been bypassed because it was, from the start, misleading. Perhaps an important antidote to the Kool-Aid ladled out by the gurus of interactivity is some meaningful engagement with the possibility that, as Jarrett (2008) puts it in her polemically titled essay,



'Interactivity is Evil', interactive audiences may find themselves confronting, 'their own absence of agency and freedom in the free expression of the generative capacity offered to them.' This is more than just the nightmare fantasy of an old-media curmudgeon who can't put down *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 1993) – it is the goal of marketers who imagine that interactivity might serve as a strategy for deferring critical reflection.

The economic uptake of interactivity, as critical Media Studies 2.0 reminds us, is integrally tied to the attempt to more effectively influence consumers. The move from subscription based services to 'free' advertising-supported services provided by the likes of Google, Facebook, and MySpace is predicated on the shared business model of swapping convenience, access, and information for willing or unknowing submission to increasingly detailed forms of monitoring. These are the terms of a new form of productive exchange: Google will provide me with free e-mail if I let them data-mine my messages, Facebook will help me keep in touch with friends, if I let them use the information I post and my online behaviour to learn about me and eventually target market to me.

It is not insignificant that the seemingly 'naturally' emerging model for digital media is becoming increasingly reliant on advertising. Even subscription-based services like mobile telephony and pay TV are becoming more reliant on ad-based forms of revenue generation. In this regard, a critical approach supplements William Merrin's (2008) compelling and thought-provoking account of Media Studies 2.0 with the observation that an important element of 'top-down' media content remains relatively constant: that of advertising. The somewhat disturbing corollary is that various forms of branding and attempts to influence consumer behaviour remain perhaps the dominant remaining form of the 'social' in the pre-media-2.0 sense invoked by Merrin (2008): 'a top-down phenomenon and nationally shared bond'. Even as our students go about constructing their own participatory, 'bottom up' version of the social, crafted through ego-casting, social networking, photo-sharing, and so on, much of the infrastructure they use will be supported by, and thus permeated by, shared forms of advertising. This commercial structure, in other words, provides both the economic glue that holds the new version of the social together and the one common denominator, content-wise.

The economic uses of interactivity should remind us that the man credited with coining the term that provided the prefix for the digital revolution – cybernetics – was engaged in theorizing the process of feedback-based control. Cybernetic theory bears directly on the emerging model of feedback based influence: websites that target advertising to us based on the content of our messages; TV that sorts and targets viewers based on their patterns of consumption, and so on. Taking a cue from Wiener's work, we might rethink cyberspace, in its commercial form, as, 'directed space', 'steered space', or even 'governed' space. Wiener anticipated the possibility that a cybernetic model might be deployed not just as a technique for mechanical guidance, but as one of social control. He described strategies of scientific management – the precursor of the emerging surveillance-based rationalization of marketing – as an early

form of programming, and made an explicit connection between cybernetics and marketing:

A certain precise mixture of religion, pornography, and pseudo-science will sell an illustrated newspaper ... To determine these, we have our machinery of fan-ratings, straw votes, opinion samplings and other psychological investigations with the common man as their object ... Luckily for us, these merchants of lies, these exploiters of gullibility have not yet arrived at such a pitch of perfection as to have things all their own way.

(Wiener 1948: 185)

A critical approach keeps this ‘not yet’ in mind, as a reminder of the work that needs to be done to distinguish the potential of empowerment from practices of asymmetric information access, and the control and manipulation with which they are associated.

### **The petabyte promise**

Where marketers go, politicians aren't far behind. The model of monitoring-based micro-targeting is being imported into the political realm by companies like Catalist, which, according to one news account, is, ‘documenting the political activity of every American 18 years and older: where they registered to vote, how strongly they identify with a given party, what issues cause them to sign petitions or make donations’ (Graff 2008). As in the case of commercial marketing, the goal is to influence behaviour by exacerbating the information imbalance. The era of database politics envisions a world in which it is the voters who become transparent to the political campaigns bent on manipulating them with customized and selective marketing appeals. This is not to discount the increasing scrutiny to which politicians are subjected in the era of political blogging and the always-on news cycle, but rather to point out the increase of information on both sides. Yes, the public has more information available to it than ever before, but, thanks to the monitoring capability of interactivity combined with technologies for data storage and sorting, marketers, politicians and the state have access to unprecedented amounts of information about the public. How this plays out in terms of power relations may well have to do with who has the capability to make sense of the information available to them.

One of the potential political ironies of the digital era is that at the very moment when the tools are becoming available to help foster a truly informed electorate, the recourse to information and deliberation as tools for understanding is called into question. The stance of reflexive debunkery described by Latour and defined by Žižek as the decline of ‘symbolic efficiency’ – goes mainstream at the very moment when media developments provide unprecedented public access to information and discussion. This is why the stakes are so high in the attempt to challenge the form of demobilizing savviness fostered by figures like Luntz and Limbaugh who, in essence, urge the public: ‘don't worry about the facts, don't bother educating yourself, we all know that there is enough evidence to support any viewpoint you like – so just stick with the prejudices and disinformation you've got.’ To the extent that access to information might be empowering,

maintaining power relations means mobilizing strategies to undermine the efficacy of this access and the forms of knowledge it might help to foster. One of the crucial tasks of critical Media Studies 2.0 is to counter these strategies.

If access to information is one target, conventional forms of knowledge has become another. In a much-hyped issue of *Wired* magazine, info-trend guru Chris Anderson recently argued that the advent of data warehousing at an unprecedented level, 'offers a whole new way of understanding the world' which renders theory obsolete: 'Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity' (Anderson 2008).

This new form of understanding neatly complements the demise of symbolic efficiency – it relies on closing the gap between sign and referent by remaining agnostic about causality and meaning. Since, as Anderson (2008) puts it, '[c]orrelation supersedes causation' in the petabyte age, 'No semantic or causal analysis is required.' Nothing to debunk – just patterns generated by the process of what Ian Ayres (2007) calls 'super crunching' breathtakingly large amounts of data. The goal here is to bypass the tricky realm of meaning by generating patterns that predict without explaining anything. If a search algorithm kicks out the information that someone who drives a Mercury is more likely to vote Republican or to respond to a particular type of advertising appeal, the question of why is displaced by the apparent predictive power of correlation. The perfection of prediction without understanding represents the apotheosis of a certain type of instrumental pragmatism – a tool that need not reflect on the ends to which it is applied.

The enthusiasm for the power of 'super crunching' in the petabyte era is of a piece with a contemporary constellation of savvy attempts to bypass the debunked level of discourse and get 'things' to speak for themselves. Consider, for example, the emerging science of neuromarketing (which measures consumer response by tapping directly into their brains), or social science attempts to measure unconscious biases, and the resuscitation of lie-detector and voice-stress technology in popular entertainment to get to the 'truth' behind the facade. The impulse here is what Žižek (1996) describes as a psychotic response to the demise of symbolic efficiency: 'psychosis involves the external distance the subject maintains towards the symbolic order ... and the collapsing of the Symbolic into the Real (a psychotic treats "words as things"; in his universe, words fall into things and/or things themselves start to speak)' (Žižek 1996: 196, emphasis in the original). As Anderson (2008) puts it in his essay on 'The End of Theory': 'With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves'.

The catch, of course, is that this new form of understanding is limited to those with access to giant databanks and tremendous processing power. If practical knowledge in the petabyte era means making sense out of incomprehensibly large datasets, it is a form of knowledge destined to be monopolized by the few. Once again, at the moment when information becomes increasingly available to the public, the very mode of understanding shifts (if we are to believe Anderson) in ways that render it inaccessible

to the populace. This is not to suggest that Anderson is necessarily correct – the forms of knowledge he is describing are instrumental: how to market more effectively; monitor epidemics; calculate actuarial tables; and predict voting patterns. However, it is important to point out that in the information age, empowerment may not be flowing uni-directionally to the public at large: new forms of power and control come into play at the very moment that old forms, predicated on a lack of interactivity, are shaken to their foundations.

### **Matter matters**

It is against this background of server farms and data mines – not the smokestacks and coal mines of the industrial revolution – that claims of the waning importance of matter loom large as one of the signature ideologies of the digital era. In the preamble to their ‘Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age,’ for example, futurists Esther Dyson, George Gilder, and Alvin Toffler (1996), proclaim that ‘The central event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the overthrow of matter’ (Dyson et al. 1996: 295). The implication of course, is that resource ownership (at least in the case of strictly ‘material’ assets) no longer matters. This is why *Time* magazine can tell us that we, the public, are gaining control even as concentration of the ownership of material media assets continues apace – and why Murdoch can proclaim power to the people when he purchases the tools of their alleged empowerment. One of the duties of critical Media Studies is to explain why the matter/immaterial distinction is a misleading one, and why indeed, matter still matters – along with ownership and control over the resources that we use to interact with one another, to distribute the fruits of our own productive activity, and to access information.

What we are seeing taking place in the digital realm resembles, in certain important respects, a digital-era enclosure movement (Boyle 2003). The goal of enclosure is to capture productive resources in order to set the terms of access to them. Thus, where agriculture is the dominant mode of production, enclosure means establishing property rights over land and setting the terms of access for agricultural workers. If information becomes an increasingly important source of value, then ‘enclosure’ refers to attempts to establish property rights over it and the resources involved in its production. Thus, for example James Boyle describes the recent surge in intellectual property rights as a second form of enclosure: ‘once again things that were formerly thought of as either common property or uncommodifiable are being covered with new, or newly extended, property rights’ (Boyle 2003: 37). Attempts to establish ownership over elements of the human genome, the chemical formulas for traditional medicines or hybrid crop strains, and so on, might be understood, in these terms, as strategies for privatizing the commons.

Much the same might be said about the assertion of ownership claims over information captured by interactive applications, including details of click-stream activity, patterns of social networking and Internet search behaviour, style of video game play, and so on. This information, generated by users, is becoming very valuable, as evidenced by the recent valuation of Facebook at close to \$15 billion (Associated Press 2007). It seems fair to conclude that much of that value was based on the company’s information

assets, as opposed to its hardware. In the digital economy, interactivity is productive since user-generated information is at the heart of strategies for mass customization. Capturing the value of user-generated activity, in this context, entails enclosing the means of its production: that is to say, the networks and databases upon which such activity relies. Ownership of the infrastructure for online communication, shopping, socializing, and information access allows companies like Google, Amazon.com, Facebook and so on, to set the terms of access whereby users surrender control over personal information. These companies have the capital to build the new generation of digital information mills: the giant, power hungry server farms cropping up in regions where energy is (relatively) cheap and plentiful like after-images of the industrial era: factories populated not by people, but by their data doubles. The production of this data is farmed out to the populace piecemeal: members of the public construct the data mine as they go about their increasingly monitored lives, trailing information as they go. With every Gmail missive, every post to Facebook, every online purchase, members of the networked public add content to the rapidly growing, privately owned and operated, storehouses of information that will provide the basis for the new forms of marketing, political campaigning, population tracking, and 'understanding' described by Anderson.

### **Conclusions: exploitation 2.0**

A critical approach to Media Studies 2.0 will need to take account of some of the crucial social shifts that work to contain the potential of interactivity by turning it to the ends of rationalizing the marketing process. In particular, it needs to mobilize a practice of collective sense-making to respond to the commercial and instrumental ordering of information in both the political and economic spheres. If there is a form of expertise that such an approach might cultivate, it would be an expertise in sense making: in developing strategies for crafting knowledge out of the welter of information available online, and countering the demobilizing short-circuit of deliberation by the postmodern right. If the goal of monitoring-based customization is to disaggregate members of the public in order to develop strategies for more effectively influencing their behaviour, one of the goals of critical Media Studies is to develop shared forms of knowledge that help make sense of the information landscape for purposes other than marketing and prediction. If super crunching in the data mine can predict how voters will respond to marketing appeals in given conditions, the goal of critical Media Studies lies elsewhere – in shifting these conditions so that public feedback serves to shape social and political objectives, rather than contributing to the rationalization of public relations campaigns.

The predictable response to these distinctions is a very 'retro' equation of the market with democracy: the assertion that true democratisation is merely a matter of the perfection of techniques for the collection of feedback via the development of more intensive and extensive forms of market monitoring. The thrust of such an equation is to suggest that we need no longer worry about a (surpassed) split between public relations and public participation: the two have become one and the same. In its most blunt formulation the claim here is that the rationalization of marketing is the

same as public empowerment – interactive participation is inherently democratic. When we are told that the novelty of the digital media environment is its ability to deliver on a well-worn and debunked promise (‘this time, it will really come true: markets will be truly democratic’), and that because the technology is different, we shouldn’t raise ‘outdated’ concerns, we should remain wary. Perhaps the most important time to worry about the workings of power is when we’re told that it is no longer a concern because we’re all empowered by the advent of interactive media technologies.

The goal of critique is not to downplay the potential of interactivity, nor the socially significant uses to which it is being put, and the various pleasures and forms of fulfilment and creativity it fosters; rather it is to maintain a commitment to realizing the politically empowering *potential* of interactive media, rather than deferring it with the assertion that it has already been realized. A further goal of critique is to discern amidst the chaotic multiplication of media forms, and modes of consumption/production, some shared logics, including that of the emerging model of interactive advertising. Perhaps this is in part what Žižek means when he refers to the logic of capital as, ‘that of a Real’ (2006: 196): At the point when its structuring role has become ubiquitous it disappears, drops off the very map whose multiform contours it shapes. Underlying these and holding them together, is the shared interactive commercial logic this article has outlined. It is a form of targeting and customization that relies on increasingly ubiquitous forms of media access combined with comprehensive monitoring, the assembly of large, privately controlled databases, and the application of new strategies for information management – for understanding the patterns that emerge from incomprehensibly large datasets. It is not a logic of democratization, but rather of asymmetrical information collection, the capture of productive forms of interactivity, the enclosure of information, the debunking of collective ‘knowledge,’ and the formation of new forms of ‘understanding’ limited to those who control the data.

Countering this logic requires the development of critical approaches appropriate to an era of information glut. To the extent that the exercise of power in the current conjuncture relies not on scarcity but on the proliferation of narratives, critique needs to think beyond a strategy of what Latour describes as an automatic, mechanical deconstruction. Critical scholarship as well as progressive politics needs to develop approaches for making collective sense out of new information landscape with its proliferation of narratives, and for arbitrating between them. Perhaps this need helps explain the popularity in some circles (and the visceral critique in others) of theoretical approaches like those of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou that attempt to develop a post-naïve and ‘post’-deconstructivist conception of truth. As its more sophisticated practitioners have noted, the moment when a stance of critical debunkery turns reflexive is the moment at which it is forced to come to terms with its inescapable entwinement with notions of truth, which it can neither ignore nor leave behind.

Related to the development of techniques for making sense out of the glut is the need to develop an updated critique of exploitation. The Marxist

conception was useful and productive in that it highlighted the logic of the unfree 'free' choice.

The choice to sell one's labour power at the prevailing rate was nominally a free one, but, insofar as it internalized the forms of violence and alienation that structured the terms of the choice itself, it remained coercive. To the extent that the celebration of interactivity equates the capitalist 'free' market with democracy, it is worth recalling this formulation and perhaps extending it. The users of interactive media freely agree to turn over control of information about themselves to Google, Facebook, and the like, but they do so on terms structured by those who own and control the means of interaction, communication, and community building, and will continue to do so as long as the commercial model remains the dominant one. The fact that important forms of communication, social networking, and information provision will be largely commercially supported has become taken for granted – a de facto concession to the ideology of 'the overthrow of matter' (Dyson et al. 1996).

The extent of the naturalization of this economic model is evidenced by the fact that it sounds odd these days to even suggest the possibility of non-commercial alternatives to the privatized networks that form the infrastructure for our commercial-drenched e-mails, our advertisement-laden social networks, and indeed, the entire ad-supported infoscape. Even though it sounds curmudgeonly retro to focus on questions of ownership and labour, digital media provide a wealth of examples for alternative models, from publicly funded networks, to open-source code development, and shareware. Real interactivity means participation in shaping the structures that regulate our social lives – not just in increasing the range of choices available within the horizon of those structures and the social relations they help reproduce. The task of critical Media Studies is to differentiate this form of interactivity from what Žižek describes as 'pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active", to "participate", to mask the nothingness of what goes on' (Žižek 2008: 183). Such a distinction is crucial to the project of making interactivity live up to its promise, rather than settling for the claim that it already has.

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